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Moving things along: the conduits and practices of divestment in consumption

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Abstract

This paper provides a geographical analysis of divestment. Drawing on two years of intensive qualitative research with households, we explore empirically the range of conduits that figure in household divestment, showing how surplus and excess things are routinely moved through specific conduits. We argue that, rather than focusing on the trajectories of things in divestment, it is practices of divestment that merit attention, and that divestment itself is also a practice. Further, we argue that divestment practices are about trying to constitute a normative around surplus and excess things; that they connect up to the reproduction of particular consumption practices and to the meta practice of consumption (Warde, 2005). The paper also considers the relation between divestment practice and the question of disposal. We argue that, as well as paying attention to conduits, connectivities and the work of the return, there is a need to focus on placings and practices, that not only have the potential to act-back but which are always acting-back.

Key words Divestment Consumption Practice Disposal

Introduction

This paper provides a geographical analysis of divestment. The counterpart to appropriation, divestment entails the separation of people from their things. It encompasses the passage of significant objects between generations (Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Marcoux, 2001), loss and abandonment (Buchli and Lucas, 2000; Layne, 1999; Mara, 1998; McCracken, 1988), as well as mundane acts of getting rid of ordinary goods and artefacts, things like settees, clothes and the paraphernalia of child rearing (Gregson, 2006). Our starting point is that divestment matters profoundly to the development of consumption research. Whilst consumption has figured centrally in geographical research over the past decade (Jackson and Thrift, 1995), emphasis remains on commodity chains, commercial cultures and the activity and practice of shopping (Cook and Harrison, 2003; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003; Freidberg, 2003; Hales and Opondo, 2005; Hartwick, 1998; Hughes, 2001; Leslie and Reimer, 1999, 2003; Jackson, 1999, 2004; Jackson et. al, 2000; Gregson et. al, 2002), and to a lesser degree on appropriation (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). There are at least two difficulties with this situation. The first is that it perpetuates, albeit tacitly, the primary myths of consumption (Miller, 1995). To leave divestment untouched is, on the one hand, to leave unchallenged that consumption is predicated on the prior activity of divestment, or – in its stronger form – that divestment is foundational to contemporary levels of consumerism. On the other, it is to permit the type of linear thinking that draws unexamined, often causal, connections between contemporary consumption and current levels of waste generation (Barr, 2004; Cooper, 2003; Strasser, 2000), typically of the form that today's 'waste mountains' (of fridges, freezers, TVs etc.) are the effect of a rampant consumerism.¹ If we were to summarise this situation, then, it would be to posit clear parallels between it and that which gave rise to Miller's (1995) call for a grounded form of consumption scholarship, to counter the myths of consumerism. Focused on unravelling acts of purchase, the ensuing rich vein of consumption research has exposed the fallacies surrounding earlier understandings of shopping, acquisition, exchange and appropriation, but through its neglect of divestment has allowed consumption myths to be displaced and re-told, this time in the context of presumptions surrounding the nexus of consumption, waste and disposal.

A second set of difficulties with divestment's neglect relates to recent moves to conceptualise consumption through practice, and indeed as practice (Gregson et al 2002; Shove, 2003; Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Warde, 2005). These manoeuvres draw on various readings of practice, their key point of differentiation being the degree to which they make room (or not) in their analysis for the material world of artefacts and their surrounding infrastructure. So, as Shove and Pantzar (*ibid*) point out, whilst those who draw on Bourdieu (1984, 1992), Giddens (1984) and de Certeau (1984) emphasise how practices are constituted through routines, habit and competence, others – taking inspiration from Schatzki (2001) and Reckwitz (2002), as well as science and technology studies – see practices as entailing using things in particular ways. In this reading, consumption becomes a meta practice, subsuming numerous other practices – shopping, walking, watching TV, eating for example – all of which involve consumers as practitioners actively using particular things in certain ways and within specific meaning frameworks, the effect being the reproduction and/or transformation of particular practices (see, for example, Shove and Pantzar on Nordic Walking; Dant (1999) on wind surfing). Whilst we remain firmly in favour of such developments, this understanding of practice remains grounded in appropriation: practices are about ways of *using* things in certain ways, habitually or routinely. This overlooks two points: first, that objects have physical lives; they age, decay and deteriorate, can be used-up and/or breakdown or fail to work appropriately. Secondly, practices are embedded in social lives that are embodied. The practices we practice therefore do not remain constant throughout our lives but may be transient, ephemeral even. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rapidly changing world of leisure sport, where the second-hand market in barely-used artefacts testifies to forms of participation that can be more transient than habitual. But it is also characteristic of practices that relate to ageing. The practice of parenting, for example, alters inexorably as children age; and as children age the objects used to enact parenting change too, as the world of prams, cots and buggies is overtaken by one of walkers and toys, and thence bikes, computers, Play Stations and mobile phones. Our point then, is that whilst practices may be reproduced at a social level, at the level of individuals and households they are often more transient, both temporally and in terms of their utilisation of particular objects. Combine this with the physical lives of things and we start to see how practices are not just about the appropriation of things but about their divestment too. Indeed, that to continue to be a competent practitioner of certain practices might require us to get rid of certain artefacts and to substitute something different, newer, or more appropriate.

At one level the paper elucidates this point. At another, however, we want to argue that divestment is also a practice. Focusing on ordinary, everyday consumer objects, we show how getting rid of things entails not just habit, routine or even competence, in the sense of knowing what to do with certain things or how to divest ones self of particular things, but relations between artefacts, conduits and meanings. Particular types of things, then, are shown to be divested using specific conduits in particular ways; not only because this is seen to be normative – a means to constituting appropriate trajectories and imagined future social lives for specific things – but because these activities also have clear social effects. As a practice therefore, divestment is argued to be thoroughly reflexive and a key means through which the social order, in the sense of social narratives, is reproduced. But it is also shown to be a thoroughly spatialised and spatialising practice, in which geographical imaginations

also loom large. In this latter respect the paper moves beyond theories of practice and their relation to consumption research to connect with broader theoretical debate, particularly the arguments of Mary Douglas and, more recently, those of Kevin Hetherington and Rolland Munro on disposal.

In her classic analysis of dirt and pollution, Mary Douglas (1984 [1966]) shows how the social world is based upon categories and classifications, and is ordered and maintained spatially, through defining as 'dirt' or as a 'pollutant' anything that transgresses that social order, displacing this to the outside or avoiding it (cf. Sibley, 1995). In Douglas' analysis, things are defined as dirt or pollutants not because they are unhealthy in-and-of-themselves, but because they transgress particular cultural categorisations, creating cultural disease. At the heart of this is the idea of dirt as 'matter out of place'. 'Where there is dirt there is always a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements' (1984: 35). Anything that threatens or crosses the boundaries of these classes of things and meanings will be defined as 'dirt'; anything that is contaminated by something other is 'dirty'; anything that confuses or contradicts these 'cherished classifications' will result in 'pollutant behaviour' (p 36), as anomalies and ambiguities are controlled and removed (pp 39 – 40). Controlling anomalies may be achieved through removal or by following rules of avoidance, which can be more strongly enforced by defining the anomalous as dangerous. Ambiguities can also be reduced: by settling upon a definition that forces into a single class of things those which could be placed in more than one category; or, alternatively, ambiguities could be celebrated, to highlight other worlds or states of being, but which in themselves serve to redefine, reiterate and reintegrate this social system. Ultimately though, Douglas' analysis relies on a binary distinction between inside and out, in which what is inside the boundaries of the social order ought to be meaningful and representative of the social and cultural order, whilst that which undermines this is displaced beyond the boundaries, through acts of displacement which may include acts of divestment.

Whilst Douglas undoubtedly recognised the difficulties of such binary thinking and imaginations, acknowledging the capacity of things to return representationally if not physically, it is only recently that the implications of the return have been explored more fully, notably in Kevin Hetherington's recent account of disposal (Hetherington, 2004). Drawing on the work of Munro (1995) and Hertz (1960), Hetherington argues that there are always gaps and fissures, through which apparently disposed of meanings can return to haunt. Moreover, Douglas' distinction between inside and outside is further problematised by the recognition that there are multiple conduits of disposal (Munro, 1995). Taken together, Hetherington and Munro's accounts bring into question the possibility of disposal in the representational sense. But what they leave unexplored, largely because of their neglect of the material qualities, capacities and characteristics of objects, is the argument that the things divested from homes – the things which cross the threshold or which are moved through conduits, which are displaced if not disposed of – are in some way or other troublesome, polluting or threatening of the domestic social order. Merely thinking about the rise of the second-hand economy (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Williams, 2003) and the hand-me-down/around economy (Clarke, 2000), suggests that to think in this way is at the very least restrictive. Correspondingly, and in a debt to Bataille (1989), we prefer to think about the *divestment of the surplus* in things which may include the troublesome

and/or 'polluting' (i.e. the excess), but which is far from defined by this, and in terms of the divestment of a surplus that is always integrally bound up in practices and their reproduction (Gregson, 2006).

The paper has two sections. First, in line with our commitment to grounded scholarship, we explore the diversity of divestment practices disclosed by a two-year intensive qualitative study of households.² Drawing on a range of household types, we show the range of conduits that figure in divestment and how surplus things are moved through particular conduits. Such arguments are critical to developing the notion of divestment as practice. The next section builds on these findings and their interpretation, emphasising that divestment practices are about trying to constitute a normative around surplus and excess things, but that they connect-up to the reproduction of particular consumption practices and to the meta-practice of consumption (Warde, 2005). It also returns to the question of disposal and its connection to divestment practice. We argue that to think through the geographies of divestment practice requires an attention to practices, placings, conduits and connectivities that not just have the potential to act-back but that are always acting-back.

'Getting rid': the conduits of divestment

Our focus in this section is on three households, located for comparative purposes in Nottingham.³ The households differ on a host of socio-economic criteria (income, employment status, the number of people in the household, children present or not) and exhibit different levels of social and cultural capital.⁴ Such differences impinge on how divestment is enacted, influencing not just which conduits move surplus things along but the range of conduits used. We begin with a household that in its broad configurations and value systems will be familiar to academic audiences, with a professional, middle class couple (Karen and John) with three young children, contrasting this household with that of a single male professional (Guy).⁵ Karen and John exemplify the divestment practices of middle class households. Guy is typical of those of our participants with a greater investment in 'recycling', a term that many of our participants used to describe the circulation and redistribution of surplus things. He illustrates the lengths to which some households go in divesting the surplus. We then consider a very different household, Daphne and Dorothy, in which investment in 'recycling' is low and where divestment is enacted almost exclusively through the wheelie-bin. Unemployed housing association tenants, Daphne and Dorothy have strong investments in the new and appear to epitomise the connections drawn between contemporary consumerism and waste generation.

Karen and John and family⁶

Karen and John self-identify as '30-something, middle class, urban professionals'. They met in their 20s whilst studying and have lived together in Nottingham since then. Karen is the head teacher of an inner-city primary school; John is a freelance writer. Karen and John's house is furnished with an eclectic mix of the old and inherited, 'cheap Ikea', the hand-made and made-to-measure, and specifically sourced second-hand goods. Some of these items, notably a display cabinet made by Karen's grandfather, and its contents – 'best crockery and china teapots' – are acknowledged to sit uneasily in the couple's living room, because 'we're the type of people and of a generation that doesn't do 'best'', but that they continue to be in their possession is indicative of the importance to them of materialising memory (Kwint et. al, 1999).

Opposite this is a large expanse of 'funky, geometric, chocolate brown and white' wallpaper. The couple will buy, when they can afford to, top-end high street clothing brands for themselves, Paul Smith, Ted Baker and Diesel, usually in sales, mixing these with cheap basics from Gap and Asda. Indeed, Karen describes herself as 'the type of woman who looks in Ted Baker but ends up buying in Zara'. In contrast, their investments in other types of branded goods are minimal. John does not have a mobile phone for instance. Having not seen the need, he is now too embarrassed to go into a shop, comparing himself to how he imagines it to be to be 'an old person who can't operate the video'. Karen's mobile – handed down to her by her 'mobile phone savvy' sister – is one she cannot name; neither does she know the extent of its functions. That Karen and John no longer spend much on themselves is about their primary identity as parents. And, having bought a house that accords with their self-image, they are now altering and refurbishing it, as an appropriate, safe, inner-city home for a young family. Karen and John re-use things and repair things: in their possession 'old' garden furniture inherited from grand parents becomes a decorating table; they persist with broken toy golf clubs, using sellotape and string to mend them; and boxes of packaging are used for children's drawing materials. In the manner of many middle class parents, they pass on and lend amongst family and friends a vast amount of things associated with babies and young children, crib, cot, beds, toys, books, clothes, slides and swings. But they also throw things out, like scaled-up kettles and a dysfunctional TV. It is in what they teach their children, however, that we see some of their core consumption values. Having accumulated £18 for her birthday, their four year old daughter had set her heart on a teddy bear from The Teddy Bear Factory. Karen declared that she could only buy this bear if she gave up some of her existing teddies. For her, the cost of this customised bear was such that it could not be justified without a degree of loss on her daughter's part. Karen thought the loss would be too much; that her daughter would not be able to make the sacrifice. To her surprise, between six and eight bears were displaced, to her brother, to school and to an Oxfam charity shop. Acquisition here involves the play of expenditure on what is desired with divestment and the sacrifice of the surplus; it is not about endless accumulation. This though is a sacrifice infused with ethics: it attends to the potential for extending the social lives of particular things (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986), and has at its core an imagination encompassing disadvantage and development, as well as networks of kin relations and friendship connection.

Karen and John's investments in consumption, their relations to particular sorts of goods, their identities – as parents, as a couple, as professional people, and their key social relations, all impinge on how they divest themselves of their things. But, as we have argued, divestment is also a practice. To open discussion up therefore, we narrate various events that occurred over the course of the twelve months, highlighting what Karen and John (and their children) did with some of their things. As will become clear, in narrating events we use primarily a present tense narrative. This is a deliberate tactic, in keeping with our earlier arguments about practice. Our point here being that, whilst it might draw on stocks of knowledge, practice itself is never prior, or indeed, finished, but rather is being continually enacted; its location consequently is in the now of the present, the moment that is the very conjuncture produced by working with particular things in particular ways.

The primary story in this household concerns Karen and John's decision that their youngest child sleep in his own bedroom. Such is the effect of this decision that John

confessed to frequently asking, 'Why are we doing this?' 'Why can't he just go in with his older brother?' And 'Why can't they just have bunk beds?' The answers are to do with middle class practices of parenting. If Karen and John were other people living in a different area of the city then the two boys might indeed have had to have had bunk beds, even if their parents might have desired otherwise. But Karen and John are not such people; they are middle class and part of a network of similar people, with similar values and similarly aged children. As a result of this decision, Karen and John move their bedroom to the attic; the 'office' which was in the attic is moved to the cellar, and the cellar area is converted to habitable rooms. In order for these changes to occur various things are set in motion too. The children's clothes that were in the attic are taken (by Karen) to a charity shop (Oxfam), whilst the books that were up there are divided between Karen's school and the same Oxfam charity shop. Also in the attic, an old turntable and speakers are taken to the 'tip' and old lampshades and duvets went, but who knows where, for Karen and John cannot remember. Down in the cellar: half a dozen broken chairs that John had repeatedly tried (and failed) to 'fix', 'old' garden furniture from Karen's grandfather, which she had recovered but which had got to the point of being 'dodgy to sit on', 'old' carpet, 'old' paint and an 'old' rug brought with them from a previous house but now seen to be 'tatty', 'dirty' and 'grotty' are taken to the tip, whilst a former kitchen table is converted into a garden platform by John. Meanwhile, flags and a Belfast sink moved from the cellar, but only as far as the garden, whilst Karen and John try to work out what to do with them. Moving the 'office' to the new office in the cellar provides the opportunity to buy some new office furniture and furnishing, from Ikea and to move previous things (notably shelving that John had had in his bedroom as a teenager) to one of the children's bedrooms. But 'kitting-out' the cellar as an office requires that a computer go in the cellar. This is an opportunity to install a Broadband connection and to purchase a new PC, with the old one being displaced to the eldest child's bedroom, 'for games'. Finally, although this is a marker of the temporalities of research rather than an end point, Karen and John find that moving their bedroom to the attic requires that they rationalise their clothing. As a result, they get rid of their wedding outfits – in John's case 'a green double-breasted suit', said with ironic laughter, 'So I didn't think I'd be wearing it in the near future' and a coat that Karen no longer liked, having seen a parent (older than her) wearing it to a Parents' Evening. Both sets of wedding clothes and the coat are taken to the same Oxfam charity shop.

Whilst this intricate pattern of object displacements is the primary event that occurred in this household, a few secondary stories add another level of detail. One concerns the management of the children's or child-related things.

When we first met this couple, Karen said that they had been thinking of doing a boot sale to deal with all the baby-related things they no longer needed. However, Karen's sister had recently become pregnant, so this baby-related stuff was now being held-over, and the idea of the boot sale dropped, or at least put on hold. By the time of our fourth visit to this household, much by way of the young baby-related things had been passed from Karen to her sister, but only once she had had the baby, a boy. Throughout the course of the research, Karen – like all the mothers – routinely went through the children's clothing. With two young boys, her standard practice is to hold-over the eldest son's outgrown clothes for the younger one, but now that her sister has also had a boy she is also holding-over her youngest son's clothes. With her daughter's clothing however, the practices are different: these are released via the

charity shop, because Karen has no family or friends with young girls to pass them on to. Similarly, the children's toys and games also flow through the hand-me-down/around economy. So, periodically toys and games are released to the Oxfam charity shop, to various school fund-raising events and to appeals, as well as passed to younger siblings. What is particularly interesting here is that Karen tries to pass other things through this hand-me-down/around economy and fails. One instance of this occurred in relation to a child's car seat, which she took to the Oxfam shop, 'but they wouldn't take it – they're a bit like cycle crash helmets, they don't know whether they've been in a crash or not'. Others are her sister's tacit refusals, including a pram and a baby bath. Karen thinks of taking the pram to a sale of the type discussed so vividly by Clarke (2000), but then realises that the pram would need to 'have a road test'. She laughs, and speculates that it will be altogether easier to sell it at a boot sale. 12 months on, then, and the boot sale is still being talked about as a possible conduit for the material culture of Karen and John's babies.

Before leaving Karen and John's household we highlight some minor stories involving small objects routed out of the house via the wheelie-bin. A toaster, 'inappropriate gifts' from school and a kettle all went this way. The toaster was displaced by the arrival in the house of a new one, a gift from Karen's parents. The arrival of the new toaster provided the opportunity to 'chuck out' the old one: 'it wasn't the sort of thing you could hand on to anybody else' (Karen). Receiving 'inappropriate gifts' is part of Karen's life as a head teacher, as is moving them on. On this occasion Karen had been given a dog with a religious poem attached. She regarded this as something which she couldn't possibly pass on to anybody, so she threw it in the household's wheelie-bin. The kettle story is as follows: Karen and John had a stainless steel, 'shiny' kettle they had purchased to match the look of their relatively new kitchen. However, it had started to 'scale-up'. Less than two years old, but well beyond any guarantee period, this was 'chucked' in the bin, and replaced by a virtually identical model.

Five points emerge from the above. First, a pattern is discernible: over the course of this twelve months Karen and John moved things out of their home utilising a number of conduits repetitively. We can identify five: the tip, 'school (i.e. Karen's workplace), an Oxfam charity shop, the wheelie-bin and their respective families, notably from Karen to her sister. Secondly, particular objects and categories of objects are habitually routed through the same conduits. So, all surplus adult clothes considered to be in reasonably good condition and young girl's clothing go to the same Oxfam charity shop. Children's books and toys are either displaced between the siblings or taken to school and/or the charity shop. Things that are deemed impossible to pass on or which are assessed as 'broken' and/or not worth repairing are 'chucked' in the wheelie-bin. Having been held-over, the baby-related things are automatically offered first to Karen's sister, as too will the surplus young boy's clothing; whilst the tip is the place to which Karen and John take the bulky, dysfunctional, broken, 'wonky' and 'dodgy' things in their lives, that won't fit in the wheelie-bin. Thirdly, these conduits clearly work socially and culturally. We have explored this question more fully elsewhere (Gregson et. al, 2007/8), but that Karen offers the material culture of her babies to her sister, and that these gifts are accepted, works to reconstitute the sister relation as a relation of sisters who are also mothers. In the manner of sharing clothing, it uses things to signify the social bond or connection, materiality to symbolise and indeed materialise their social relation. Moreover, in

routinely releasing some of her children's surplus to school, Karen simultaneously enacts the good mother and the appropriate Head Teacher, an example to other mothers; the circulation of cloth illustrating the workings of a social and moral economy of mothers (Clarke, 2000; Gregson and Beale, 2004). Indeed, what Karen does with her children's things constitutes a particular (middle class) practice of mothering, in which the passage of children's clothing, toys, books and so on between mothers, and then to children, works to reproduce the practice, as normative as well as habitual for mothers in this milieu. Fourthly, more disruptively, attempts to divest things in particular ways can be refused; objects can act-back and conduits can refuse to move things along. The children's car seat and pram are classic examples. Fifthly, some conduits whilst certainly known of and/or about remain imagined (the car boot sale).

We will come back to these points in the next section but for the moment highlight that what Karen and John do with their surplus things is not unusual. Indeed, theirs is the standard pattern disclosed by all the middle class professional households with younger children that we worked with. By way of comparison, therefore, and to demonstrate that divestment can be more complicated and labour-intensive, we draw on a different household, with the same levels of social and cultural capital but without children.

Guy

Guy is early 40s, single and lives in a Victorian house in the Castle View area of the city, a purchase he made through financial investments. He is also a landlord, renting out his previous house in another part of the city to students. Originally from Cambridge, Guy is university-educated. He has lived in Liverpool and Glasgow but has been settled in Nottingham for around 20 years. He plays the cello and piano to performance standard, indeed a grand piano is a feature of his living room; he takes holidays in places like Bolivia, Islamabad, Ethiopia and the Hindu Kush; and he works as a computer programmer and database manager. Like Karen and John, Guy has strong interests in design and interior aesthetics: knowing jokes (about modern art), references to architectural design and confident taste judgements pepper his conversation. The similarities end there however, for whereas Karen and John would like to be able to buy certain things but cannot afford to, Guy has the money both to buy what he desires (for example, a £1300 record player, 'that just said buy me') and to realise his design aspirations. Indeed, much of the research time spent with Guy featured the spectacular re-design and refurbishment of certain rooms, notably a £12000 bathroom. Moving to this house has brought about a fundamental reappraisal of Guy's things. The house is felt to dictate a particular style and arrangement of things, to have estate agency (Miller, 2001). So, whilst Guy had previously lived in a house decorated with wall-to-wall book shelving, he now finds himself 'culling' the books and adopting disciplinary tactics around book purchasing ('one in/one out') in an effort to reduce the book accumulation and to live in the more minimalist manner decreed by this house. Equally, Guy finds himself trying to live without sentimentality or nostalgia. He has told his parents that he 'doesn't want to be the custodian of other people's lives'; he manages to rid himself of his grandmother's 1930s horse hair sofa ('time to let go the past'); but at the same time the back zone areas of Guy's house are full of mementos, 'knickknacks' and impulse buys (for example, a cream velvet jacket; a horse's skull brought back from Bolivia; and a singing car bought from a

street seller in Manchester). There are piles of things such as mountaineering equipment he thinks he might use again, and – laughing at himself as he does so – he shows us his *four* vacuum cleaners as well as a manual cleaner, ‘just in case there’s a power cut!!!’ Guy, then, has as complex a relation to consumption as Karen and John, or indeed any research participant we might select. Whilst he buys a £1300 record player, most of his clothes are from Matalan, Tesco, the Burton sale and Clothing Direct. He spends £5 on t shirts and £15 on trousers – ‘I’m not the sort of guy who’s going to spend fifty quid on a pair of boxers from Paul Smith – a con job’. Whilst his investments in design propel him in one direction, the accumulations elsewhere in his house disclose a counter-narrative; whilst he articulates art-house style and a minimalist aesthetic, he is seduced by the attractions of a street seller’s singing car. As important though is that Guy is a committed recycler of things, far more so than Karen and John. He acknowledges that getting rid of things is as much effort as getting things, and castigates himself when he resorts to using what he describes as ‘lazy (divestment) routes’, such as the council bulky-waste collection service and/or skips. Moreover, he has gone so far as to suggest to the council how they might reorganise their recycling facilities to ensure greater levels of participation, a scheme which would involve siting recycling banks at petrol stations.

As with Karen and John, Guy’s investments in and orientations towards consumption have clear effects on what he divests himself of, and how. Again our emphasis is on practice, specifically the events that result in divestment and what is done with and to things in the process. Some of these events exhibit clear parallels with what was disclosed in Karen and John’s household, notably room refurbishment and its effects on things. Correspondingly, we highlight two events that differentiate Guy from Karen and John, which illustrate his stronger investments in the work of divestment and greater diversity of divestment conduits.

Guy’s previous house is rented out to five students. At the end of the academic year Guy took a week off work to do the ‘annual clear-out’ of ‘the Benedict Road house’ in the Raleigh Heights neighbourhood. ‘Benedict Road’ is in a symbiotic relation with Guy’s Castle View home: clearing stuff out of Benedict Road makes the space for no longer wanted stuff to be shifted from Castle View into Benedict Road, and for Guy to buy what he wants for his own residence. During this week Guy moved a bookcase out of Benedict Road which had been serving as a bathroom cabinet, replacing this with a matching cane set which had been in Benedict Road originally but which he had moved to Castle View, only to decide that ‘it didn’t go’. ‘Under my feet in cupboards’ there, he took it back to Benedict Road, declaring that he should never have removed it in the first place. The bookcase went to a charity shop, ‘run by heroin addicts to buy more heroin’, but a charity shop Guy knows to take furniture. Much as Benedict Road works as a conduit for Guy, so it does for his tenants’ parents. Guy declares ‘All the students bring the crap their parents want rid of, like brown toasters from the 1980s that don’t match their things’. And the tenants too leave things behind when they move on, leaving Guy the task of working out what to do with them. But rather than bin the abandoned toasters, he takes them to another charity shop – ‘the old people’s one’ (Help the Aged), for reasons that are entirely to do with the ease and convenience of dropping them off by car. Discarded and abandoned clothing (tops, shoes and a cap) are taken to another charity shop, along with more clothing which Guy has brought back from Glastonbury Festival. Two fridge freezers are collected by a second-hand shop, along with a coffee table; kitchen shelving is placed out ‘on the

street for people to help themselves'; and then Guy stuffs a huge pile of 'old and grotty' carpet and lino in several wheelie-bins on Benedict Road, saying 'the bin men here say you can't do that, but at Benedict Road they have much lower standards, so ...'

Looking closely at this clear-out, we see that Guy spends considerable time distributing the surplus across a range of charity shops; although ease and convenience do figure, this is a long way from Karen and John's habitual use of the same Oxfam shop. Further, Guy's greater knowledge of the second-hand economy allows him to displace items through conduits which Karen and John do not utilise, specialist charity shops, second-hand shops and the street. Moreover, such is Guy's investment in recycling that he brings abandoned items back to his home from Glastonbury, does the divestment work on them (in this case laundering), and then places them in a charity shop where he knows their value will be rekindled. But, just when he appears to be the recycling paragon, Guy resorts to the bin with the carpet and lino. Not just surplus, but in Guy's meaning framework excess, this 'old and grotty' stuff can only be divested by resorting to conduits that connect directly to the waste stream, a manoeuvre Guy legitimates through an intriguing articulation of the distinctions drawn in waste management between neighbourhoods.

The second event is more a series of events, closely connected with Guy's attempts to clear out accumulations and instate a more minimalist home aesthetic. Again we see how he invests considerable time, energy and money on divestment. A pile of photographic equipment (developing tank, enlargers, fish eye converter, self-loading spirals) is offered first to Jessops (a photographic retailer – 'too obsolete for them') before passing it on to the 'old people's shop; they have the contacts'; a huge collection of kitchen equipment (pasta makers, ice cube makers, mayonnaise maker, juice extractor, blenders, steamers) went the same way; a harmonium was taken first to the city centre auction rooms, where it was rejected, and thence to the tip; but all this pales into insignificance when compared to the story of 18 pianola rolls. Rather than throw these into the wheelie-bin, which he acknowledged would have the effect of turning the paper (and music) to pulp, Guy took the rolls to an Ideal Home Exhibition in Cambridge, where he passed them on to a collector with whom he had been put in contact via an enquiry through a piano specialist in Nottingham, combining this with taking his elderly parents out for the day. When asked why he'd gone to such lengths to get rid of these things, Guy replied that to chuck them would have been a shame and that the journey he undertook offered them the opportunity to be recycled, a similar rationale to that underlying rescuing and resuscitating the abandoned clothing from Glastonbury. But what is also going on here is a wish to save from 'rubbish' that which has previously been valued, by Guy. To divest himself of his things seems to require of Guy that he not only alleviate the descent to rubbish but that he find the conditions for the revaluation of particular things; that he transforms the no longer wanted into the imagined gift.

Close scrutiny of these events discloses the same five points we highlighted in relation to Karen and John. There is a discernible pattern to divestment; indeed, Guy works with nine primary conduits (charity shops, a variety of second-hand outlets including shops and auction rooms; specialist retailers; key contacts; the street; the tip; skips; the wheelie-bin; and 'Benedict Road'). Moreover, Guy utilises these conduits habitually and in a hierarchical relation which maps the waste hierarchy,

invariably attempting to place things firstly in sites where they might be re-valued, and only then, if this placement is refused, resorting to the conduit of the tip, imagined here not as a dump at which to abandon things (Karen and John) but as a recycling centre. The bin, when it is used, is noteworthy as the conduit identified as appropriate for moving along excess. As such, Guy is clearly working reflexively: what he does with particular surplus things *is* a thought-through activity, in which certain sites (the Help the Aged Shop, the heroin addict shop, the street) are seen and known to offer greater potential for re-valuing certain things than others. Furthermore, Guy's divestment practices evidently work socially and culturally. Albeit that he does not constitute kin social relations through the passage of things, in the manner of Karen, there is a strong sense in which these divestment practices, and their labour intensity, contribute to Guy's own self-narrative. As someone whose 'recycling' acts and investments work to save things from wasting, and are understood as such, what Guy does with things, in turn, can be seen to materialise the extent to which he cares about attenuating the social lives of things. Moreover, and as with Karen and John, it is important to note that conduits can close down, that things can be refused – even when someone is as knowledgeable as Guy – and that conduits and things can act-back with unintended consequences, as on one occasion when Guy put some drawers out on the street outside his Castle View property, only for these to be used to smash a neighbour's car window.

Finally in this section and by way of an important contrast, we consider a very different household with different stocks of social and cultural capital, in which the divestment conduits and practices are remarkably singular and strongly oriented towards waste generation.

When conduits contract: Daphne and Dorothy

Daphne and Dorothy are sisters in their late 30s/early 40s. They have only ever lived in the Nottingham area. At the start of the research they had recently moved from a condemned, damp council flat in Mansfield to a brand new housing association flat in the Player Fields area. Neither Daphne nor Dorothy is in employment, although they are enrolled on access courses at a local college. Aside from this they are keen on craft work, make their own jams and chutneys, and Daphne is an avid reader. As with Guy, Daphne and Dorothy have few living kin relatives; their parents live back in Mansfield, in local authority sheltered housing. The parallels with Guy end there though. Narrated retrospectively, in that their house move occurred approximately a year before the research began, for Daphne and Dorothy moving house was about getting rid of virtually all their possessions, not moving them with them. 'Condemned', it seemed that the valuation and subsequent demolition of the old flat spilled-over to infuse their things, impelling them to divest themselves of almost all that had been associated with this place. Indeed, the only things to move with Daphne and Dorothy to the new flat were a cooker, freezer, TV and VCR. The rest was skipped. In its place, the sisters bought themselves new furniture, furnishings and fitments, and paid for a decorator to do the flat (a gift from their dad). Now 'a complete convert', Daphne refuses 'to hold a paint brush ever again', has a decorator annually and also pays for the carpets to be professionally cleaned twice a year.

New home: new things: new practices: this is a central motif to how Daphne and Dorothy live in their new flat. On the shelves of their hand-built pine dresser, for example, is the beginnings of a new collection, of manufactured Cornish-blue kitchen

ware, bought principally from John Lewis. A present-day instance of 'best', this is precisely the type of collection (and practice) with which Karen and John dis-identify. At Christmas the sisters order themselves a Fortnum and Mason Christmas Hamper, deciding that they would 'treat (them)selves to a bit of Posh'. As tellingly, Daphne refuses to allow things to accumulate in the flat: having got rid of four shopping trolleys of books when they moved, she vowed in future to pass books on using the same 'one in/one out' principle cited by Guy. But it is the power of the new in Daphne and Dorothy's lives which sets this household apart; this conjoined with strong investments in 'buying cheap – I never buy dear, I'd rather use it till it wears out and replace it, rather than repair it'. At one level this means that Daphne and Dorothy frequently find themselves getting rid of broken-down goods rendered economically valueless by the relativities of current production/repair costs. At another, however, this is about aesthetics. In valuing the new what Daphne and Dorothy are actually valuing is not the latest or the most up-to-date fashion, but the appearance of things. What matters is that the surface is shiny, that is, *not* 'shabby', *not* 'discoloured', *not* 'pitted'; that it is 'not only clean but looks clean as well'. Connoting a respectability (Skeggs, 1997) that conjoins with practices of cleaning, and therefore the inferred absence/presence of (social) dirt, this meaning framework works powerfully in Daphne and Dorothy's household to insist that the divestment of particular things is enacted through one conduit almost exclusively, the wheelie-bin.

Unlike Karen and John and Guy's research participation, Daphne and Dorothy's was characterised by life that just went on. Nonetheless, given the investments Daphne and Dorothy make in consumption, during the year things broke down and were carried away (the cooker, the fridge freezer) or binned (a DVD player, the music centre, a pair of electronic kitchen scales, a clock radio, a wristwatch, an ice cream maker, a toaster). More interesting, however, are two small-scale events, each located in distinctive consumption practices yet which illustrate how a certain aesthetic works to shape divestment. The first involves kitchen utensils. One day, whilst leafing through the Argos Catalogue looking for something else, Daphne noticed some stainless steel utensils that were 'reasonably priced'. 'I'll have that', she thought, knowing that their current plastic utensils ('slotted spoons' and fish slices) had 'started to look really dingy and horrible ... they'd gone nasty; mucky and grotty; they'd got to go'. Predictably, for this occurred mid-way through the research, Daphne got rid of these by putting them in the bin. A second event concerns a 'planter', given to the sisters as a Christmas present by their mother. 'I didn't like it; it were onion-shaped, so all the stuff came out when you watered it; I planted it up but it didn't grow very well; I thought it were an ugly thing anyway, so I threw it out'. We see here how that which is deemed 'ugly', 'dingy', 'horrible', 'nasty', 'mucky' and 'grotty' by Daphne is automatically, seemingly unthinkingly, placed in the bin. When questioned directly, however, Daphne offered an account of her actions, initially by identifying these things as 'rubbish' and the bin as 'where rubbish goes'. This is no different to what happens to declarations of excess with Karen and John and Guy. But what marks Daphne and Dorothy out is that what is divested from their household is, almost invariably, in the category of the excess. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of books (taken to the public library, 'because I never throw books away and I'm a firm believer in the public library service') and magazines (taken to her mother, 'because I know my mum enjoys them, and she hasn't got to pay for them, and she can pass them on to the other old ladies, so more people can get use out of them'), there is very little that this household moves into the category of the surplus. Rather, Daphne is

someone who declares that if she doesn't want certain things then 'probably nobody else does either', thereby foreclosing the possibility of utilising other conduits to get rid of their surplus things, all of which depend on the capacity of the divestor to imagine the future social lives of things. That Daphne articulates this position, and enacts it in what she does with their unwanted things, is both a manifestation of the alienation of their social lives and an effect of the interweaving of home aesthetic with the workings of the gift. Daphne and Dorothy are not averse to passing things on, albeit within a very small social network. But what they do not do, and indeed use the bin to avoid doing, is to pass things on that might be seen (by themselves and others) to reflect negatively on them. That which has lost its lustre, that is no longer shiny, that is pitted or mucky and horrible, or – within another meaning framework – that which is 'broken down cheap' cannot be gifted, not only because it is taken as self-evident by Daphne and Dorothy that no one would want such things (and see too Karen's 'it wasn't the sort of thing you could hand on to anybody else' remark), but because what would return would be the very meanings they are trying to divest themselves of, namely shame and a lack of respectability. For Daphne and Dorothy, wasting such things, by placing them in a conduit that connects directly to the waste stream, is the appropriate, respectable, indeed normative, thing to do. Indeed, the gift of the wheelie-bin is that it absorbs the 'mucky', 'nasty', 'grotty' and 'horrible'. Imagined as terminating the socially useful life of a particular thing, in carrying things away to their 'death' the wheelie-bin forecloses the shame of attempting or allowing such things to be passed on, and works to reclaim the self from the polluting effects of the excess.

Daphne and Dorothy provide further amplification that divestment is not just an act but a practice: it is habitually enacted by households using the same conduits to move along particular categories of things. Indeed, the only distinction in this respect between Karen and John, Guy and Daphne and Dorothy is in the range of conduits they use, with Guy being at one end of our study households, Karen and John the norm, and Daphne and Dorothy at the other end. That these differences exist is a matter of how specific identities, values and forms of social and cultural capital mediate the constitution of the surplus and the excess. In turn, they highlight how much the social life of particular things is dependent on their situatedness: the same objects can be cast in very different trajectories depending on just who happens to acquire them or buy them initially, for it is here, in the initial act of purchase, that the conditions for the future social lives of things are laid down, by the kinds of imaginative geographies that either enable the gifting of the surplus or which close this down through the workings of excess.

Divestment, practice and disposal

In this section we return to the theoretical considerations with which we began, focusing first on the implications of these findings for the development of a practice-based conceptualisation of consumption, and secondly on the question of disposal.

The previous section demonstrates clearly that divestment is a practice. Yet we can also see that these practices and their associated conduits are simultaneously about trying to constitute a normative. In binning, giving away, passing-on and selling the surplus and the excess, people are continually attempting to work out what to do with particular things, drawing on specific meaning frameworks and their conjunctures with the particularities of certain objects' materialities as they do so. Further, although

binning things (in the manner of Daphne and Dorothy) is clearly to use the normative, in that it feeds 'rubbish' tidily towards the waste stream via the intermediary agency of waste-collection services, it is evident that such acts are seen by many as insufficient and inappropriate, at least for dealing with certain types of surplus things, notably children's clothes, toys, books, baby equipment, books and even pianola rolls. Given this, we argue that what is going on here is not just the drawing-on of a normative but the use of divestment practices to bring the normative into being (Clarke and Miller, 2002). This normative is both nuanced and situated; it requires a degree of knowledge to enact, in that it requires both local geographical knowledge about various potential outlets for revaluing certain sorts of things *and* knowledge about things themselves, the regulatory frame that might mediate their re-use and the matter within; it requires that a modicum of divestment work be done by the divestor, notably in relation to carrying things away; and it allows for things to act-back, to refuse to pass through the conduit identified.

At the same time, it is evident that practices of divestment connect to the reproduction of particular consumption practices. Guy's clearing out of all the kitchen equipment, for example, is about getting rid of some of the things that the previous inhabitants had left behind *and* his realisation that 'to be a proper cook you just don't need all this gadget stuff – all you need is a few basics like pots and pans'. Karen and John's passing-on of baby things is not just about getting rid of what is no longer needed but about making room for other forms of child-related material culture, a PC for the children to play games on and watch DVDs. Daphne's passing of books to the public library connects to the buying of something new to read. In many ways, then, getting rid of things is about being an appropriate, competent practitioner in a particular consumption practice. To go back to our examples: it is about being a particular type of cook, who doesn't need gadgets to produce good food for dinner parties (Guy); about being good parents, who know what sorts of things their children need at particular ages and can provide this (Karen and John); and it is about recognising that certain books, once read, are rarely read again, at least by the same person, and are better off placed where they might be re-valued by being read by somebody else (Daphne).⁷ Correspondingly, consumption practices are not just founded on the acquisition and utilisation of particular objects in particular ways, but their divestment in particular ways too. To be a competent practitioner involves a thoroughly reflexive engagement with the ways in which objects are used, even *not* used, and to know what to do with those things that have fallen-out of use, that is individual practice, so that the practice itself might be reproduced elsewhere, through the re-utilisation of the object. More than this though, we can see running through all these instances that at the same time as they are getting rid of things, Karen and John, Guy and Daphne and Dorothy are also attempting to get rid of a meta practice, namely the accumulation, holding over and storage of goods, or 'just in case it might come in useful sometime'. Admittedly, they are far from successful in their endeavours, but this neither negates their intent nor their efforts. Moreover, we can see how getting rid of consumption as accumulation itself connects up to forging a rather different practice of consumption, in which it is the practices of circulation and of waste generation, rather than purely accumulation, which play with those of acquisition and expenditure. Attempting to stave-off accumulation by attempting to divest through circulation is one way through which people may work to counter the myth of consumerism as intrinsically wasteful, by extending the social lives of things, but it remains the case that it is easy, convenient and still *appropriate* to enact divestment in the UK via the conduit of the

bin and/or various waste collection services, and that 'accumulations' are highly likely to be positioned and understood as 'excess', a meaning category which, seemingly inexorably, has the effect of moving things through the conduit of the waste stream.

Finally, we return to the question of disposal, to the arguments of Douglas, Hetherington and Munro, and to the geographical imaginations that underpin these. Divestment for Douglas is about the connections between disposal and dirt, and is enacted through a binary of in/out. 'Out' here is a beyond; it is an elsewhere beyond a border, which has the capacity to accommodate cultural dirt and troublesome meanings precisely because it lies beyond. A no-place beyond boundaries 'out' works representationally and materially to maintain social order. As we have shown in this paper however, whilst 'out' may be physically beyond, in the sense that divestment moves things beyond the boundaries of the home, it is still both representationally and physically somewhere, a bin, a skip, a charity shop, a friend's home, a family member's home, the street. And that divestment places things somewhere means that this 'outside' is actually 'in'. Indeed, even in those circumstances that most closely approximate to using physical absence to attend to 'dirt' (i.e. excess) – when things are carried away in ways that connect to the waste stream – their placement 'out' is still in doubt. For whilst landfills and incinerators do make things physically absent, their effects both representationally and in matter have the potential to return to haunt, as anxieties regarding CO2 emissions, or more generally in terms of 'filling up the planet with my rubbish', guilt about consumption, or just as stories about things.

What we see here is not just the inversion of the in/out binary but the collapse of this binary and the categories on which it depends. Indicative of Hetherington and Munro's arguments concerning the power and efficacy of the return to disrupt binary thinking, such re-conceptualisations emphasise the importance of thinking in terms of conduits, networks and flows, rather than the altogether more fixed relativities of here : there and in : out. This is a geographical imagination that works through open-ended webs of potential connectivity, and not through linear trajectories of the type that infuse the connections drawn between production, consumption and disposal (as waste generation). What we wish to highlight in this though, is that conduits require *placings* to move things along (Hetherington, 1997). Whilst conduits bring into being the routings that move things along, constituting traces of object journeys for us to map, if we wish, they simultaneously depend on placings that are always about attempting to do something with and to things. Such placings therefore are always practices. Moreover, these practices are always spatialised and spatialising, and they too are about the work of the return. Thus, *binning* something, *giving* it to somebody, *selling* it, *putting* something on a wall, *not only work to move objects along but work back, as practices*, on their divestors. Indeed, it is through practices of divestment that we continually re/constitute social orders, using what we do with and to things – including how and where we place them – to constitute narratives of us, of others and our relations to them. Practices though are always provisional, of the moment and thoroughly contingent. In placing, things can be refused, expelled or rejected by a particular conduit and displaced to another. Sometimes this may be because the conduit itself cannot move it along (as with Guy's wall or the charity shop to which Karen took the car seat), but that this happens is also because things have the capacity to refuse to do what we attempt to do with them; to insist that our understanding of what is appropriate to do with them is inappropriate. In this sense it is the object and

the conduit that are acting-back. But what remains constant in all this is the endless reiteration of certain divestment practices. So, we continue to attempt to get rid of specific sorts of things through particular conduits. Things like surplus books and clothes keep being taken to the charity shop; we continue to pass particular surplus things to certain relatives and friends (and not to others) and we invariably keep on binning the 'disgusting', 'worn out', and 'shot through'. Since it is through these practices that we both narrate the social order (the normative) and seek to constitute what this normative might be, and through these same practices that we narrate our identities, social relations and indeed our sense of our place in the world, it is imperative that we continue to keep on doing these sorts of things with our surplus and excess things. Along with acquisition, the means by which most of our things move into our lives, divestment practices are fundamental to being in the world. Continually going-on, these practices with the object world of consumer goods are never finished, rather they are always on-going and always acting-back.

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¹ Divestment's neglect has rendered consumption researchers largely mute with respect to key related UK policy domains, in which instruments aimed at attending to the volume and characteristics of consumer and household waste figure increasingly centrally (Bulkeley et al, 2005; Powie and Dacombe, 2006), frequently connected-up to vaguely specified notions of sustainable and/or ethical consumption.

² The research comprised a one year ethnographic investigation of 16 households living in the North east, the majority living in a former coal mining village (Gregson, 2006), and a repeat depth-interview programme involving 59 households living in various areas of Nottingham, again over a twelve month period. The ethnography was conducted in calendar year 2003; the depth interview work, by virtue of the number of households involved, spanned 2003 – 2005 and involved four lengthy interviews, at approximately three-month intervals. Interviews were organised around a disposal diary, in which participants kept a record of what objects they got rid of, and any related stories. The interviews were all conducted by Alan Metcalfe,

and were undertaken under the principles of opting-in. Thus, whilst certain households involved the entire household in the research, others had just one primary participant. The research materials were then analysed within the research team, through both a critical discourse analysis and the analysis of categories of object stories. The paper draws on both sets of analysis.

³ In focusing exclusively on Nottingham households, we are dealing here with a set of households that by virtue of geography have at least some of the same potential divestment conduits open to them, in the shape of a particular set of charity shops, a particular set of household waste recycling centres (or 'tips'), particular second-hand outlets, and so on. Thus, two tips, or recycling centres, one in the city and one run by a neighbouring council but easily accessible, were utilised by many of the car-owning households. Similarly, a PDSA shop near to Sainsbury's and certain roads in Player Fields with a mixture of charity shops and second-hand shops were well known to many research participants. At the start of the research the city council had just a single wheelie-bin collection system, organised weekly and supplemented by a bulky-waste collection service. By the end of 2004 a kerbside recycling scheme was being introduced.

⁴ They are also drawn from different areas of the city. Participating households were located within four distinctive areas: 'Castle View', 'Raleigh Heights', 'Player Fields' and 'Trent View'. Here we focus on households located in the Castle View and Player Fields areas. Castle View is marked by its distinction and difference; it comprises professional middle class households and retirees living in mainly nineteenth century dwellings. Player Fields is 'inner city', ethnically highly heterogenous and described by some as 'the second-hand capital of the western world'. Raleigh Heights, which features in passing, is an area that many participants described as 'slowly going downhill'. It is characterised by high levels of student occupation, alongside high-rise 1960s flats.

⁵ All person names are fictional.

⁶ Our representational tactic in this paper is to seek to move away from an increasingly normative reliance on the use of direct quotation in reporting qualitative research materials in human geography research. This is not a matter of space restrictions but rather to attempt to weave together a narrative that brings together actions, events, meaning frameworks and objects. It is the type of representation that, we would argue, can be generated from depth, longitudinal research participation, of the sort that informs this paper. But it is also a tactic that is a logical outcome of thinking in terms of practice, where what matters is to locate talk within, and as part of, a situated practice.

⁷ It should be noted here that, like many readers, Daphne clearly continues to value the institution of the public library, in terms of what this represents and its reading practices.